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COLLEGE STUDY OF ENGLISH

I

College study, as we judge it by the quality of intellectual leaven that our young graduates bring into society, is still a theme of discontent. In particular, we feel that the college study of literature and of the literary medium foment no genuine social demand for books and writing of the highest scholarly and reflective type. The criticisms voicing this discontent, it is true, often imply unreasonable expectations as to what the college can achieve with studies elective and students not particularly elect. "We require it to do all sorts of things for all sorts of people, and then wonder why it misses doing an ideal sort of thing for a special sort of people." But the discontent springs from a sound conviction that the college, after all, has a central cultural aim, and we can sift the unjust criticism from the just only by giving that aim a sound definition.

Like other social ideals, the aim of college work has an accepted name, for which, however, an acceptable definition is hard to draft. An ideal differs from a scientific idea in that the qualities to be included and excluded in defining it are matters of partisan feeling. Thus "liberal culture" cannot be settled as a working conception by considerations of logic alone, for each disputant will accept as describing it only that complex of items which he can feel to be charged with a distinctive value; nor will he relinquish to any rival definition the name of "liberal culture," carrying, as it does, the associations of value even when the conception is left vague. A judicious educator, therefore, is apt to offer noble or neat characterizations of his aim rather than precise definitions. Huxley, for example, describes the liberally educated man as one "whose body is the ready servant of his will, . . . whose intellect is a clear, cold, logic engine, . . . whose mind is stored with . . . fundamental truths of Nature, . . . whose passions are trained to come to heel, . . . who has learned to love all beauty, . . . and to respect others as himself." Justly as this passage is esteemed for its emphasis on the *scope* of an ideal training, it nevertheless shows disputable items, once it is offered as a

conception of the scientific type that Huxley would have us base our work upon. So, when President Hadley describes the college as a place where young people "learn things they are not to use in after life by methods that they are to use," he stresses pithily the disinterestedness and discipline of college studies without committing himself as to their plan. Many such formulas could be quoted in portrayal of a "liberal education" without telling any more in the upshot than that it prepares not for a livelihood but for living. Clearly, the college cannot shape a definite programme towards an aim left so vague.

One source of uncertainty in this aim lies in its complexity. Culture has some elements that are directly producible by academic tasks; others, that are in their nature by-products. A knowledge of history, literature, and science, and some critical competency in dealing with facts, are the immediate products of work with books. To create them is the college job. But the spirit of learning, integrity of mind, a taste for literature of distinction, and the breeding habitual to men whose commerce is with ideas, are matters that supervene upon the direct achievements. They grow—if at all—adventitiously, out of the contacts of college life. This fact seems to be one of the hardest for our educational practitioners to accept resolutely. Cultivated tastes and habits strike us so patently as results that abide in after life, when all the specific knowledge and competency may be forgotten, that we will not see that singleness of aim at the latter is the condition of winning the former. Yet we have its parallel in the field of morals. One does not achieve nobility of character by acts done with an eye to self-ennoblement: they would build not a personality but a prig. In the field of intellectual endeavour itself we have the evidence of women's clubs. Here is no lack of zeal; nor shall we account for the barren outcome by calling the zeal "amateurish." What is specifically amateurish here is a preoccupation with the effluences of culture to the neglect of its substance. The atmosphere of an intellectual coterie is a real value; so is good talk struck out between informed disputants: but where everybody is satisfied with a subject once it has yielded the sensations of urbane debate, and with her own competency once she can add a piquant comment, the life of the mind has fled. Culture that counts as a force in society springs from undivided efforts to transmute irresponsible opinion into opinion that will "cash in" as purposive

thinking. All else is mere *snobisme*, valuing ideas not for their consequences but for their esoteric status as the latest things talked about.

That criticism of a college, therefore, which consists in calling upon it to be a belletristic club irradiated by fine "personalities" merely clamours for the glow without stoking the fire. Professors who emit personality directly through class-room sermonettes are dubious apostles of culture. I would not belittle the appeal of timely *obiter dicta*, or hold the lecturer too rigidly to his specialty. For many heedless youngsters the "inspirational" digressions of a Norton doubtless serve as a sort of upper-class welfare work. But students capable of an interest in the business of the class-hour must feel it belittled when treated habitually as a point of departure. Of the same misleading tenor is much current talk of leisure and spontaneous reading as the really fruitful things in a college career. It is easy, of course, to multiply the testimony of those who, in retrospect, extol the influences of their college life to the disparagement of their college tasks: but such retrospects are usually too superficial to afford any valid conclusions for the ordering of either. Even the trustworthy accounts of profitable idling leave one to ask whether idling would have taken so literary a turn but for the tonic air of a place where, after all, work with books was taken seriously. Four years of life—even when lived in the tradition of a leisure class—are too valuable to spend merely basking in genial influences. The college justifies itself to the better conscience of the community only by having a work to do—work that entails *essential* refinement as an indirect result. As to the hall-marks of refinement—the marks of "gentleman" and "lady" as socially construed—the college can only blend its imprint with that of its students' homes and social *milieu*. For itself, it should insist that learning is a greater thing than social status, and that, in any case, the latter is not its concern. The college sheds a fostering atmosphere for the growth of all that is gentlemanly, but is not professionally responsible for it.

So much of preamble seems necessary, if we are to appraise one of the college departments in the light of the whole college programme. In 1871, when President Woolsey of Yale declared that "the general idea of what a college ought to be is tolerably fixed," the curriculum showed for English merely a weekly prescription of rhetoric and in the upper classes some reading of

"masterpieces." When one views what is offered under the rubric "English" to-day—courses in the early stages of the language, surveys of literary history, courses dealing with the literature intensively by periods, courses in American literature, in rhetoric, in versification, in critical theory, in the technique of various literary types—one has misgivings, not only that the college "idea" of 1871 has got lost from sight, but that if other departments have undergone a like elaboration they no longer unite to promote any college idea whatever. The departments have grown up as the natural units of teaching efficiency, but they can grow to a solidarity and independence that make them intractable to any common aim. A statesman was recently described by his rival as standing "uncertain as to what the public needs, amid circles of lobbyists who know exactly what they want." The college presents somewhat the same aspect, with its central aim undefined, and its courses meanwhile planned by men who, naturally enough, know exactly what they like to teach.

II

Liberal culture, as a rich summation of ideal tones and overtones, is, then, too complex a harmony to be described by any neat formula, and will be missed, in practice, by efforts to strike the overtones. But if any tones are to be struck, we must see them in black and white on the score. An ideal not presentable as a working concept cannot call for a plan of action. If, then, the college is to do anything definite, its primary function must get a definition. This may be stated, probably without challenge, as the initiating of qualified young people into the thinking of the world. But the formula needs expanding to be clear, and when clear is not so sure of assent.

"The thinking of the world" means here that work of enlightened minds which in every country is advancing the higher intellectual concerns of the race. Society lives intellectually in several strata—strata which by no means fall in with those of social status. All of us live some of the time, and some of us all the time, in the level of immediate facts and traditionary opinions about them. A man's thinking here is to be accounted for by its affinities with his antecedents and surroundings, not with ultimate purposes. But there persists, meanwhile, a common life of the mind in the level of cultural movements. "In proportion as a man's interests become humane and his efforts rational, he

appropriates and expands" this common life, "which," as Professor Santayana continues, "reappears in all individuals who reach the same impersonal level of ideas—a level which his own influence may help them to maintain." All the major spiritual values here define themselves, in a zone where past and future meet, as ideal forms which experience and action ought to take. The ascetic, humanistic, and scientific views of life, the aspirations of chivalry, patriotism, mysticism, the scholastic and romantic insights, must here find their ultimate validity before they can justify their social appeal.

Fruitful work among such ideas presupposes the "initiating" that my definition calls for. One may get an acquaintance with them—at least as story-material—by mere magazine reading; one can arrive by desultory study at some notion of their scope; but the college man draws from the discipline of the class-room a sense of their relations, a dynamic import that "gets by" the self-educated. This discipline derives from three features of study at college: college study presents its materials in such order and selection as to afford a winnowed experience, freed of the irrelevancies among which a self-directed reader blunders; it *interprets* authorities critically, where the self-taught can only *add* their testimony; and it keeps a wary mind for the misleadings of words. Initiating, finally, is a matter not only of opportunity but of the candidate's quality, so that a college respects its function only when it retains in its class-rooms those intellectually fit to work with ideas. Such a proviso, of course, goes against our democratic bent for giving opportunities to anybody that will get *something* out of them. But in the service of ideas the fewness of the best is not offset by abundance of the passably good, and where everybody may add his smoky little light true illumination will fail. The realm of the intellect is not democratic. If this fact pains us, we have only the consolation of Piccarda, in the lowest circle of paradise:

"The manner wherein we are ranged from grade to grade in this realm suits the whole realm, as it does the king who gives us will to will with him. And in his will is our peace."

III

That initiation into the world's thinking involves the study of literature hardly needs to be argued; but it by no means fol-

lows that literature in English needs to be studied in an English department. We assume the need only from our careless habit of talking about a piece of literature as if it were a simple product of "art," eliciting a simple response of "appreciation," whereas it is a very complex thing, answering to a variety of concerns. What we call a "classic" is psychic history as well as art, and offers subject-matter for studies as diverse as ethics and philology. If the "critic" thinks of *Samson Agonistes* as choral drama on a biblical tale, the historian looks to it as an expression of the fallen Puritan cause, the biographer gathers from it Milton's thought on his blindness, his unhappy marriage, and his obscured life—

"Under change of times,
And condemnation of the ungrateful multitude,"

the philosopher notes its purport of tragic catharsis, and the philologist, its seventeenth-century idiom. Division of subject-matter, therefore, between the departments of literature, philosophy, and history, is not a division between courses that deal with literary texts and courses that do not, but between courses that stress one concern with them and courses that stress others. Evidently, the department of English can show valid ground for its existence only where important concerns with English prose and verse are not otherwise provided for.

Three such concerns can, perhaps, be fairly made out. First, there is the tracing through literature of this or that strand in our cultural tradition. If it falls to the teacher of philosophy to give the ideas and influences that have made civilisation their more ultimate appraisal, and to the teacher of history to show their efficacy as the "formal causes" of institutions and events, it falls to the teacher of literature to marshal significantly the writings that express them as poignant—if partial—insights. Chivalry, for example, the aristocratic ideal of feudal manhood, gets its orienting as a formative conception in society, only when seen first in its rough actuality in narratives of fact, then in the fantasy and preciousness of romance, and finally in such passages as show its residuum of abiding value for the spirit.

This final bearing, be it noted, gives the study so planned a pedagogical warrant in that it brings literature under view with reference to what boys and girls can feel to be realities in the world about them. Any college freshman can be interested in

chivalry, if he takes it up as something still operative in opinion and usage, and can then read Arthurian legend, *Chevy Chase*, the *Knight's Tale*, and the *Fairie Queen* with a roused understanding. Literature thus approached as *relevant* to something engages a respect that it fails to enlist as mere "good reading." Too often it gets in the class-room a bid for interest about as follows: "Here are the classics, sanctioned as such by a noble army of cultivated readers. If you would be accounted a person of taste, love them and eschew the ten-cent magazines." The appeal takes little effect; the boy finds the writings of an elder time, thrust so abruptly before him, too alien and remote to attach to anything in his own life: so he turns with a light heart from Spenser to Jack London, while his baffled teacher cries out in blame upon a material and philistine *Zeitgeist*. If, however, the boy once realises that while his likes and dislikes are his private affair, his opinions on specific issues of life will depend for their weight on his command of the literature relevant to them, he will read with the conviction of a definite aim. Neither the college nor society will test his "appreciation" of books; but society will, and the college should, test his grip of ideas—not only of such codified ideas as puritanism, neo-classicism, democracy, but of the great basic themes: ambition, loyalty, sympathy with one's kind, and love between man and woman.

In choosing texts for such a course the teacher must guard against confusing the portrayal of ideas with the portrayal of human nature or of manners. Raw human nature and the manners of a time are but the potential medium of ideas. Drawn simply as picturesque material—as in *Tom Jones* and *The Pickwick Papers*—they may be most entertaining, but they are not significant and have no place in a course of *study*. Even books relevant to ideas should be read only as far as they serve the ends of the course. Certain themes, moreover, should be treated either in alternation or by collaboration between the English department and other language departments. On the score both of expense and of over-specialisation the college cannot afford three courses—in English, French, and German—in the Romantic movement: its responsibility is to lodge in the undergraduate mind the concept of Romanticism—a concept that draws its definition from all three fields.

The second concern with English writings that can be claimed for the English department is a biographical one. A man of

letters may have a vision or message of his own as spokesman of the spirit. We then think not of his works but of his work, and may profitably make this the subject of a course. Our only danger is that of overdoing the thing. Shakespeare, certainly, deserves three hours weekly through a year; Spenser, Pope, Wordsworth, and perhaps Browning deserve half-courses. Actual biography, to be sure, is here of doubtful value, however pre-occupied with it our critical leaders may be. If the author's life bore to his message the typifying relation that gives significance to a fictive hero, its details might be held to actualise the message with a natural and graphic suasion that it would lack as a disembodied idea. Some such conviction as this doubtless led the late William James to urge the college to stress biography not only in literature but in history. Men of genius, he says, set the patterns which the rest of us follow, so that "the rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world." The genius in affairs, perhaps, enacts his message, and must be studied in his personal contacts; but the genius in literature is precisely he who can body forth his ideas in detached yet graphic print. Were it not for the great exceptions of Dante and Goethe one might almost say that the measure of his success is the irrelevance of his personal career. Certain it is that biography in the class-room, under the sentimental pretext of enlisting "sympathy with the author," amounts to little more than sublimated gossip. The vogue of Boswell has lent an apparent sanction to anecdotes and personalities as a substitute for analysis of thought.

Since in expression form is a condition of the sort of thought that gets expressed, the English department has a third distinctive concern in the historical study of literary types. The rise, the fixing, and—where it occurs—the disintegration of such structural types as the ballad, the drama, the novel, so answer to shifting conceptions and valuations in the substance of letters that their study comes to close quarters with literature as an art. Study of the contemporary types is best done as advanced work in composition—as almost the sole work in composition that falls properly to a college department of English. With composition, indeed, we touch on a vexed and difficult subject. The large freshman course that colleges now devote chiefly to the cure of illiteracy has been called into being rather by annoyance with the symptoms than by interest in their organic causes. It should give way, as teaching in the lower schools improves, to a more

intensive course, teaching the expressive resources of speech by a rhetorical theory that is part semantics, part applied logic, and part prosody, and by enough practice in writing to fix principles in mind and to "try out" the student's thinking on the ideas opening upon him at college. Advanced courses are warranted only by having advanced theory to teach, not by the mere offering of farther practice. Hence the general course just described, qualifying students to *share* in a common critical insight into the nature of the literary medium, can be followed by short courses qualifying those of special aptitudes to *contribute* their own convictions through this or that type of literary form.

IV

What is here urged in the upshot is that college study of belles-lettres is justified only in as far as it makes a drastic selection of writings according to their *relevance* to specific wakening concerns. Put thus flatly the thesis may seem to dwindle into a pedagogical truism. But a glance at the courses which English departments address to the wakening undergraduate mind will disclose the fact that in practice it becomes confused with a very different thesis. The usual freshman course takes the form of a rapid survey of the history of English literature from Chaucer to Browning,—a sort of "seeing literature" tour. Its design is two-fold: it would excite an interest in books and authors by acquainting the student with samples from various periods; and it would ensure a scholarly ground-plan of the subject by offering names, dates, and valuations as plotted out according to lines of literary "development." Implicit in this design is the thesis that young people know why the literature is important; that they will recognise at sight its bearings upon life. But young people do not know life, and the bearings of literature upon such of life as falls within their ken is precisely what they need to be shown. The classics are a shadow-world; whereas their own world, meagre and superficial as it may be, presents a field of funded thinking that is electric with the feeling of actuality. Here are incipient philosophies of life: dim patterns awaiting congenial facts to fill. Until these funded interests are stirred into expectancy a boy's learning is sterile. You may stuff his memory with facts and opinions about literature, but you will not impel him to any thinking that is either fruitful or honest. The "survey" course, in fact, tries to interest him in

the *relations* between books before he is interested in the books themselves. In "the history of English literature" it deals with a highly sophisticated abstraction—useful, indeed, to the specialist, but somewhat artificial for all that. Literature has no such independent existence that we can talk of the influences of early books upon later ones as constituting a "history," except by a rather tenuous figure of speech. As far as the general survey gets any real continuity, it is not "seeing literature" but—as some one has put it—"seeing history by its literary lanes." Candidates for the doctor's degree could get from so specialised a concern something of real cultural discipline; freshmen get from it merely a hurried sampling of the *materials* of culture,—at best a sort of intellectual bargain-hunting that leaves the masterpieces shop-handled and staled.

Much the same objection applies to courses dealing with chronological "periods," such as the "Restoration," the "Eighteenth century," the "Romantic period." To pass in review some decades of literary activity merely as such—for example, the age of Johnson, Goldsmith, Gibbon, and Sterne, is to get an essentially random sequence of ideas. It is true that the period often has a dominant cultural trend that demands study; but the literature expressing it never falls within the period's bounds, and some periods are not adequately expressed in popular literature at all. This is notably the case in the Middle Ages. The great eras of scholastic construction and spiritual passion are represented in our literature courses by tales addressed—if not to the "tired business man"—to ignorant court ladies; and young people unaware of the existence of *Dies Irae* suppose themselves to be getting "mediaeval thought" in the *Romance of the Rose*.

Conspicuous in these courses, and treacherously apt to develop in the whole outlook and influence of the English department, is a derangement of values rising in the ambiguity of "literature" as its field. "English literature" means sometimes the whole vernacular record of thought, including the non-technical literature of politics and scientific speculation. As teachers of this literature we deal freely with sermons, annals, periodicals, controversial pamphlets, and philosophical essays; and we consequently stand before our students as voicing responsible opinion in the whole field of cultural ideas. Strictly, however, our personal tastes and professional competency are with "literature" in the limited belletristic sense. The limitation

is quite to our scholarly credit; but it means that at times we are understood as social philosophers when we are speaking merely as *littérateurs*. It is in the latter capacity that we sometimes talk as if we rated success in our courses by the number of students who become "lovers" of Wordsworth or Thackeray—forgetting that what is of moment is not a vagrant "love" of Thackeray but an interest in ideas that Thackeray, among others, may sustain. As members of the literary guild, we attach an exaggerated importance to literary activity *as such*, and can easily impose on our students a sort of loyalty to current belles-lettres as a loyalty to ideas, with Masefield, Strindberg, and H. G. Wells erected into spokesmen of modern *thought*. For these writers and for others who can be said to afford at least intellectual diversion, there is doubtless a place in the leisure-reading of college life; but college work serves its high end only by holding austere to prose and verse that affords insight into race ideals.

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